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SUBJECT: IRAN,S MAJLES ELECTIONS: A TECHNICAL PERSPECTIVE

REF: (A) ISTANBUL 245 (B) DUBAI 25 (C) DUBAI 15 AND

PREVIOUS (D) 2007 ISTANBUL 694

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Classified By: Acting Principal Officer Sandra Oudkirk; Reason 1.5 (d)

11. (C) Summary: A Turkish professor who led an unofficial (unbeknownst to the Iranian regime) election observation mission to Iran's recent Majles elections shared his findings with Consulate Istanbul "Iran Watcher." (Election results and post-election analysis were reported in refs B and C). He and several Turkish academic colleagues visited Iran in March and April, ostensibly for academic exchanges with Iranian counterparts. They visited nine polling stations in Tehran and Qom, observed activity outside polling stations in Esfahan, and interviewed over 50 potential Iranian voters.

12. (C) Summary, continued: The election observation mission concluded that the regime's efforts to manipulate the election outcome, compounded by its refusal to accept international electoral observation or assistance, resulted in an election that does not meet internationally accepted norms and standards. The Turkish observers recognize the regime is unlikely to consider reforming what is the biggest obstacle to free and fair elections -- the Guardian Council's widespread disqualification of candidates. However, the Turkish observers believe there is still room for meaningful Iranian electoral reform in other procedural areas, and that this can be pursued over time by encouraging more active election observation and assessment by domestic civil society groups and political parties. We will encourage the Turkish professor to raise these ideas with his non-governmental Iranian interlocutors and others. End summary.

(C) Observing Iran's Majles Elections  
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13. (C) A Turkish professor at Istanbul's Isik University (please protect) led two unofficial election observation missions, unbeknownst to the Iranian regime, to observe the first and second round of Iran's Majles elections. He recently shared his observations and conclusions with Consulate Istanbul's "Iran Watcher." The professor and several Turkish academic colleagues visited Iran March 11-15 and April 23-26, ostensibly for academic exchanges with Iranian counterparts. However, the Turkish observers used most of their time during these visits to travel around Tehran, Qom and Esfahan, interviewing over 50 Iranian potential voters, visiting nine polling stations in Tehran and Qom, collecting polling materials, and personally observing election practices.

Campaigning  
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14. (C) The Turkish professors saw only a few subdued signs of election preparations. A government-enforced moratorium on campaigning in the final days before the election prevented candidates from holding campaign rallies, engaging in televised debates, advertising on television, or erecting billboards. However, the observers saw campaign leaflets and brochures left at park benches, bus stops, and other public places, as well as occasional campaign posters in store windows.

15. (C) Despite official restrictions imposed on candidates' use of television as a campaign tool, the observers saw widespread use of state-owned media to urge high voter turnout, "to show Iran's enemies the strength of the Iranian nation" according to one slogan. Such media efforts emphasized national pride, support for the Islamic revolution, and resentment towards the west's claims of superiority. The observers were also told by several voters at polling stations near government Ministries that the government had pressured state employees to vote. Moreover, the government allowed polls to stay open several hours after voting was set to end, to increase turnout figures. According to the Turkish professor who led the observation mission: "The government tried to minimize the importance of who is actually elected, since every candidate running is already seen as supporting the system, and tried to maximize the importance of a high voter turnout because this is what they think represents the clearest symbol of the system's popular legitimacy."

#### Public Pre-election Perceptions

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16. (C) The observers interviewed 30 Iranians before and during the first round of voting, finding widespread apathy.

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A majority of those interviewed were dismissive of the elections, and were more excited about Iranian New Year (Nowruz) festivals. Most respondents felt the system was inherently biased towards the conservative parties, making it pointless to vote. Most predicted the conservatives would win a sizable majority regardless of whether the respondents voted or not. The Turkish observers found that potential voters who felt most favorable towards reformist candidates expressed the most apathy. Finally, all Iranians interviewed expressed a pervasive preoccupation with the state of the Iranian economy.

17. (C) The observers interviewed an additional 25 Iranian potential voters before and during the second round and found them certain of a conservative victory, though most interpreted such an outcome as likely to cause problems for President Ahmadinejad rather than as a victory for his wing of the conservative movement. They continued to feel widespread apathy about the election's impact on their own lives.

#### The Vote

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18. (C) Polling stations: The observers saw polling stations located in schools and mosques, as well as "mobile stations" erected at street corners, though they saw no signs to direct voters to polling stations. Voters were not required to vote in specific polling stations assigned according to residential addresses, but rather could vote at a polling station of their choice (with the exception that those who voted in the first round were required to vote in the second round at the same polling station). The observation team was able to gain entrance to nine polling stations -- six in Tehran and three in Qom -- though they were blocked from entering polling stations in Esfahan. Inside each polling station, several government officials were on hand to oversee voting procedures and control entrance and exit. In some

stations the observers saw up to 10 election officials, including some who simply stood at the voting tables and watched voters filling out their ballots. The observers did not observe queues of voters waiting outside any polling stations. In Tehran and Qom, voters were segregated by gender. In Esfahan, men and women voted in the same polling stations. In a minority of polling stations they saw party representatives (including reformists) observing the vote conduct; they did not encounter any foreign observers in any station.

¶9. (C) Voting procedures: According to the observers, voting procedures appeared ad hoc. Polling stations did not have standalone booths where voters could vote in secret, but rather a central table where voters jostled and debated with each other as they filled out ballots by writing in the names of candidates within full view of each other and of government officials. In Tehran, where 750 candidates were competing for 30 seats, voters spent long period of time studying the board on which voter names were posted, and then writing their 30 chosen names onto their ballots. (Comment: the Turkish professor identified this system as "Single Non-Transferable Voting" (SNTV), as opposed to voting for a single party list of pre-selected candidates. He termed SNTV as a very cumbersome method for voting for a large number of seats, especially when voter information about candidates is limited or where voter literacy rates are low; he also suggested that SNTV can dilute the influence of a political party if several candidates from that party end up drawing votes from each other.) After writing in candidate names, voter folded up ballots and placed them in locked ballot boxes. Upon exiting the polling station, a Ministry of Interior official marked each voter's national ID card to prevent repeat voting. The observers assessed that voters in the second round appeared to have fewer procedural problems, as polling stations were less crowded and the official list of candidate names was much shorter.

¶10. (C) Pilot project to computerize voting: According to the observers, the Interior Ministry ran a pilot project at some polling stations in Tehran to computerize the voting process, involving a form of "Optical Character Recognition" (OCR). This reportedly involved voting on paper ballots by identifying candidates by a five-number and two-letter code, and then scanning the and tabulating the ballots at the polling station. The Turkish professor was told that Interior Minister Pour-Mohammadi had voted this way, with the process taking him 20 minutes to complete.

¶11. (C) Voter turnout claims: After the March 14 first round, Iranian press reported Interior Ministry claims of 65

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percent voter turnout, while the Guardian Council claimed 56 percent. Official figures from the Interior Ministry's election management body later asserted a 52 percent turnout rate. Following the second round, Interior Minister Pour-Mohammadi announced that voter turnout had increased by 26 percent from the first round, though the study mission's anecdotal conclusion was that voter turnout had declined in the second round. The Turkish observers claimed that particularly in Tehran (including at several south Tehran polling stations, in neighborhoods considered to be Ahmadinejad strongholds), throughout the day of second round voting, polling stations remained largely empty.

#### Conclusions

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¶12. (C) Election Observers' conclusions: The Turkish observers concluded that the Iranian regime's efforts to manipulate the outcome through candidate disqualification and other measures, compounded by its refusal (since 1979) to accept any UN or other outside electoral assistance or monitoring, has resulted in an electoral process that does not meet internationally accepted norms and standards. That

said, the Turkish observers believe that Iranian elections still offer sufficient scope for allowing voters to demand political change, especially if Iranian voters themselves can be persuaded to press the regime to undertake basic electoral process reforms. In Iran's case, according to the Turkish observers, the electoral system is most in need of reform at the "candidate qualification" phase (where the regime disqualified 1700 mostly reformist-oriented candidates), and the lack of transparency in vote tabulation at both the polling stations and the Ministry of Interior (as evidenced by the divergent, and unsubstantiated, regime claims about voter turnout percentages). According to the Turkish observers, "the introduction of computerized tabulation of ballots will offer more opportunities to manipulate the vote count." Further areas where the observers suggested that procedural reforms could have a significant positive impact are: voter registration, candidate access to the media, televised public debates, improved ballot modalities, and mandatory secrecy of voting.

¶13. (C) Comment: The Turkish observation team's conclusions provide useful food for academic thought. Regarding the most serious obstacle to free and fair elections in Iran -- the Guardian Council's disqualification of 1700 candidates -- the Turkish observers themselves recognize that without the support of regime leaders it is unlikely the Guardian Council would give up its role as the body responsible for vetting candidates, or indeed its approach of disqualifying any candidates it believes are not sufficiently vested in "the system." However, the Turkish professors do believe other electoral reforms may be achievable in Iran, starting with increased domestic election observation by civil society organizations and political parties. (Turkey's own model of relying on civil society to help monitor elections, per Ref D, could serve as a useful example in this regard.) The Turkish professor suggested that electoral assessment reports from such groups, if disseminated widely within Iran, and as long as they advocate procedural reform rather than wholesale systematic change, could then help generate wider Iranian public awareness and public advocacy for such procedural reforms. We will encourage the Turkish professor and his colleagues to raise these ideas with their non-governmental Iranian interlocutors and to pursue these ideas in their wider contacts with western academic counterparts and NGOs. End comment.  
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